General Preliminary Examination Instructions

July 2017

General Overview

The general preliminary exam is designed for students to demonstrate their general knowledge of (1) basic theoretical approaches in sociology, and (2) the department’s focus on social inequality. Students also need to show they can effectively make arguments by synthesizing a large amount of information. The process is intended to help students develop their own ideas and identities as scholars. Thus, the exam asks students to apply their knowledge to make arguments, not simply write summaries.

The Exam

Timeline

The general preliminary exam should be taken at the beginning of the third year in the program (or equivalent for part-time students). In exceptional circumstances, the Graduate Program Committee (GPC) will consider a petition from a student to take the exam earlier or later than the third year.

The exam is a three-day, take-home exam, offered on the Friday of the second week of fall semester (unless that coincides with Labor Day, in which case the exam will be administered on the third weekend).

The exam will be posted on Blackboard on Friday at 12:00 p.m. and is due to the Director of Graduate Studies (via email) at 12:00 p.m. on the following Monday. There are two exceptions to this timeline:

1. Students with a documented disability may petition for more time; and
2. Students who are both non-native English speakers and do not have a post-secondary degree (e.g., BA, MA) from an English-speaking college or university will have until Thursday at noon to submit their exams.

Format

Students are required to answer three questions from four given. While there is no absolute page limit or requirement, approximately 8-10 pages per answer is a good benchmark (double-spaced, 12-point font, one-inch margins, excluding references). All questions can be answered on the
basis of the material covered on the reading list and students are expected to heavily rely on that material when constructing their answers. Additional references are allowed but not required.

When taking the prelim, students should be prepared to:

- Discuss major theoretical approaches in sociology, as well as more specific theoretical approaches pertaining to the department’s core areas;
- Provide overviews of relevant empirical research;
- Critically evaluate the major empirical research; and
- Identify avenues for future research.

Advisor

Before taking the prelim—ideally by the first day of spring semester of the second year—students must name a faculty advisor who has agreed to serve in this capacity. Students are advised to choose an advisor with research interests in common with the student, though s/he may not necessarily be the advisor with whom the student will work on the specialty paper and dissertation.

The Reading List

The reading list, compiled by the General Prelim Committee, consists of core readings in sociological theory/foundations and social inequality (class, race, gender). The reading list is provided by the department and is designed to expose students to key scholars and key works. Some of the readings can be found on the syllabi of the department’s courses. Others have been excerpted and/or discussed in graduate seminars even if the texts in their entirety have not been part of any particular course. Still others constitute significant contributions to their fields. Taken together, the reading list is designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the inequality-related subfields it comprises.

Preparing to Take the Exam

There are three crucial strategies for completing the exam successfully.

First, students are expected to read everything on the reading list. This is an opportunity for students to become fluent in key sociological works and develop their own ideas about these classic texts. Extensive reading is an important part of this process, but reading is not enough. In order to gain mastery over the literature, students must read productively. There is no one model of how to read productively, but at the very least the department recommends that students take good notes on everything they read. Good notes are not just good summaries but also analytically driven synopses concerning the theoretical framework, key concepts, the methodological approach and data sources, policy implications, and the body (or bodies) of literature to which a particular piece contributes. Students should also be familiar with the criticisms of these works (this is where book reviews and summary articles are helpful). Students should think about how different pieces approach the same topic and what similarities and differences exist between
scholars. Building these critical reading skills and organizing the field are fundamental to students’ training as sociologists.

Second, the committee strongly recommends that students practice writing answers to some of the sample questions (available on the web site and in the Sociology Department office) and receive feedback on these answers from their faculty advisor. Because good answers develop an argument, and do not simply summarize prior research, it is imperative that students attempt to develop such arguments in practice questions.

Finally, the General Prelim Committee will hold a workshop with all interested students in the spring semester as part of the proseminar series. During this workshop students will learn about both how to study for the exam and how to write successful answers. Students are strongly encouraged to attend this proseminar meeting.

Other “best practices” for preparing to take the exam include:

- **Start early.** Students should begin preparing for the exam at least 9 months before they plan to take the exam. They should also consult the reading list in their first year to identify which texts on the list will be used in their classes to insure they take especially thorough notes.

- **Create a reading calendar.** A good way for students to make sure they are not cramming at the end of the summer is to plan ahead and complete a certain number of articles and/or books per week. Students may also want to schedule question writing sessions.

- **Use a citation manager.** Refworks (free at [http://guides.libraries.uc.edu/RefWorks](http://guides.libraries.uc.edu/RefWorks)) and EndNote are excellent programs that help scholars manage citations and notes. Langsam library often holds trainings for these programs. Check the library calendar for more details.

- **Join a study group.** Study groups can be very helpful. The purpose of study groups is to supplement students’ independent reading, not to replace it. Study groups are helpful for asking questions, discussing difficult topics, and keeping students on schedule. Study groups should not be used to split up the reading list.

- **Register for a preliminary exam preparation course.** If the students’ schedules allow for it, they should register for a preliminary exam preparation course with their advisor in the spring semester prior to taking the exam. These courses are intended to protect students’ time while they prepare for the exam, while ensuring that they are registered at full-time status. In general, students should expect faculty to help them set a reading schedule for the term and summer, not provide a one-on-one tutorial.
Grading of the Preliminary Exam

The General Prelim Committee is responsible for grading the exam. All exams are blinded to the graders, and Committee practice has been to grade each group of questions together; i.e., not to grade the exams one at a time. Each question on the exam will be graded as a pass or a fail.

In grading the exams, the committee will pay particular attention to the following questions:

- Does the answer address the question?
- Is the answer well organized?
- Is the evidence (the cited literature) relevant?
- Is the evidence (the cited literature) sufficient?
- Is the student’s representation of the evidence (the cited literature) accurate?
- Is the writing clear? Are the grammar and style acceptable?

**Pass**
All three questions must receive a pass for a student to pass the entire exam. If the committee deems an exam as a whole to be of exceptionally high quality, the committee may give that exam a high pass.

**Conditional Pass**
A conditional pass will be granted if a student fails one of the questions. In such cases, the student is expected to rewrite the failed answer and submit it no later than the first day of spring semester. Students who receive a conditional pass should be advised that the re-written answer will be judged on its own merits and graded blindly (so, it is not simply about fixing the particular problems with the original answer).

**Fail**
Students who fail two or three questions are allowed to take the exam a second time, either near the end of the spring semester, or during the regularly scheduled examination time the following year.

Students who fail the General Prelim twice are provisionally dismissed from the program at the end of the term in which they were notified about the failing grade. Students may petition the GPC to be allowed to take it one more time. The petition should include a statement of the student’s progress towards the degree and a statement of how the student plans to prepare for the exam. The petition must be accompanied by a letter of support from the student’s advisor. If the GPC approves the petition the student can take the General Prelim a third time. If the GPC does not approve the petition, the student is dismissed from the program. If a student fails the exam a third time, s/he will be dismissed from the program.

**Feedback**
After students receive their exam results, they should schedule a meeting with the chair of the preliminary exam committee to discuss their answers. The chair of the committee will summarize the committee’s feedback on all three questions. Students should then work closely
with their advisors to prepare to re-take the exam (if necessary) or to begin work on their specialty papers.

**Academic Integrity and Intellectual Property**

Students taking the general preliminary exam are expected to adhere to the principles of fair use and academic integrity in their studying and writing. There are three issues that students should consider, and a fourth relevant to students in category 2 in the “Timeline” section above:


- **Use of article and book summaries.** It is perfectly ethical and acceptable for students to read book reviews, commentaries, and review articles to supplement their reading, as long as those materials are properly cited in exam answers. These items, however, are not sufficient replacements for primary texts. Reliance on article and book summaries limits understanding of the literature, which makes arguments less effective.

- **Student interaction.** The UC sociology faculty encourages group studying and collaborative efforts to master the material on the reading list. As such, students may communicate as much or as little as the wish prior to the examination. However, the faculty has decided that students may not interact for the purposes of collaboration or feedback during the three-day exam period.

- International students may, at their own arrangement and expense, have their exams copy edited by a non-sociologist (i.e., not a faculty member or current or former student in sociology). If you rely on a copy editor, please send the name and contact information for the editor to the Director of Graduate Studies.